

COPPERHEADS

DRAWER 9

REACTIONARIES

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Civil War Reactionaries

Copperheads

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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"THE UPPERMOST QUESTION OF THE DAY."

Democrats are stigmatized as "Copperheads" because, in their recent meetings and conventions, they have held the question of personal rights to be of paramount importance. The same epithet must now be applied to General Fremont, who, as will be seen from the following which he wrote to the Abolition meeting at Concord, takes precisely the Democratic view of the case:

"If I had been able to attend the meeting, I should have addressed it mainly to the point which recent events in the West had made the uppermost question of the day, and which the people consider so vital that in Ohio they are in danger of accepting as its representative a man who uses the doctrine of free speech as a defence—a shield and the flag under which he has served—and the conduct of whose life shows that he is not willing to accept it as a complete principle comprehending all men and questions, and covering all territory. In this country men will go with principle, and if you allow false leaders to assume yours, the people will go with them because the principle carries them. I should have urged the Republican Democracy of New Hampshire to assert distinctly their old principles and to maintain the noble question which belongs to them.

"I hope, my dear sir, you will insist upon this and not allow men who are openly thwarting the objects of the government to wrest to their aid the vital principles of your party to be used, in the Confederate fashion, to mislead our own people and our own flag with its old inscription of free speech and free press. But while re-asserting those principles upon which the Administration went into power, and against which the South rebelled, I trust your people will mark plainly the broad line which separates them from the men who are really opposing the war, by making equally distinct their determination to support the government in putting the rebellion down. This done, free speech would be

secured—free speech for Wendell Phillips as well as for Mr. Vallandigham."

A great deal of honest truth is told in these paragraphs. It is true, as Fremont says, that events have made the defence of personal rights "the uppermost question of the day," and that "the people consider this question so vital that they are in danger" of electing Vallandigham. It is also true that "in this country men go with principle," while the Abolition party has gone in defiance of it. The war-cry of the campaign in 1856 was "Free-speech, free press, Fremont," and the leader of that contest undoubtedly feels the queerness of his association with a party which now employs its power in favor of government Bastilles, and for the suppression of freedom, both of speech and of the press. It is not at all unlikely that as a "political necessity," and under the lead of such men as Fremont, Trumbull and Harris, the abolitionists, before 1864, may change front and clamor again for the rights they have sought to destroy. But the people will never forget that, while a great rebellion was to be met and put down, Abraham Lincoln and his party so outraged the loyal sentiment of the North that even the success of the war ceased to be considered of paramount importance, and the people were driven to regard the defence of individual liberty as "the uppermost question of the day."

1863

THE SYMPATHY OF COPPERHEADS with the leaders of the rebellion will show itself, in spite of their professions of devotion to the Union and of willingness to fight to prevent its dissolution. They are more interested in the welfare of the traitors of Richmond, than in the honor and fair fame of the nation. Southern aristocracy and its ascendancy in political conjunction with a small Northern minority, similar to it in exclusive tastes and lordly pretensions, are dearer to them than a generous, free democracy, blessing alike the whole land and all classes.

The proof of this bias, this indirect alliance with the arrogant and unscrupulous secessionists, is too evident to be concealed by mere words used to keep up appearances and escape the odium and peril of avowed disloyalty.

Passing by the fact that Federal successes are always underrated by the Copperheads—that they are constantly insinuating how superior are the abilities of rebel officials, military and civil, and praising the lofty qualities of the, in their estimation, proud and high spirited chivalry,—passing by these facts, the misrepresentations and perversions of the recent interview in Hampton Roads, are new evidence of the real animus of those ready to fraternize with Richmond, because of their partisan hatred of Washington.

Notwithstanding Davis, Hunter, and Campbell violated their oaths of allegiance, and stand before the world convicted by their own deeds of traitorous duplicity—notwithstanding Gen. Lee's letters and declarations show that he joined the Confederacy for reasons too flimsy to be consistent with strict integrity,—notwithstanding Stephens is on record with his double-faced speeches, manifestations of weak and cowardly cunning—notwithstanding these things, the Copperheads play their congenial role of foul birds, and insist that President Lincoln has been guilty of trickish diplomacy, and that but for this the immaculate emissaries from Richmond could have been persuaded to accept an honorable peace on the basis of the Union and the Constitution!

The reason for this view is, that Gen. Grant, from the bearing and talk to him of the rebel agents, was of the opinion that they meant what they professed to mean. Such well-known deceivers as the leading secessionists are, on this showing, trustworthy gentlemen, and Abraham Lincoln the hypocritical knave!

But this is not all. On the return of the plausible trio to the Confederate capital, war meetings are held to fire the Southern heart with lies about subjugation, and every possible misstatement of the disposition and purposes of the Federal Government. Davis, Hunter, Campbell and Benjamin are the chief speakers, and their speeches very plainly indicate for what end the hollow attempt at peace negotiation was made on their part. Its object was to unite their own people so that the desperate traitors might have another chance to save themselves from the consequences of treason. With these truths staring the country in the face, Copperheads would fain have the country believe that, but for the vile scheming of President Lincoln, the war would be ended now!

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Smith: First Use of the Term "Copperhead" 799

FIRST USE OF THE TERM "COPPERHEAD"

ANENT the first use of the term "Copperhead" as an opprobrious epithet applied to Democrats during the American Civil War, the late James Ford Rhodes wrote, "I have made and had made a considerable search for the first use of the term 'Copperhead'. The earliest that I have found it employed is in the Cincinnati *Commercial* of October 1, 1862".¹ Mr. Albert Matthews in a similar investigation wrote, "the earliest known instance is from Illinois, in reference to Indiana" in the Chicago *Tribune* for September 24, 1862.² Inasmuch as both of the above authors have curiously overlooked a conspicuous and widespread newspaper usage of the term some two months before the dates of their first findings, a further word upon the matter is illuminative.

The Cincinnati *Gazette* of July 30, 1862, notified its readers: "The Copperhead Bright Convention meets in Indianapolis today", referring to the state Democratic convention. Antagonistic to the convention was a serenade accorded General Lew Wallace, a despatch account of which the *Gazette* published July 31 under the caption, "A Glorious Sequel to the Copperhead Convention". An investigation into a considerable number of newspapers has not revealed an earlier use of the abusive title. Since "Copperhead" appeared in print without quotation-marks it might seem that the application of the word was not new at that time, or type-practice in the *Gazette* office was that of omitting quotation-marks for even fresh adaptations. These are matters probably incapable of proof. Whatever the more immediate facts, they were inconsequential in the light of the real significance of the affair, namely, that the new brand of reproach had fallen upon a subject which attracted more than a state-wide interest. On this account the new concept of "Copperhead", linked to the Indiana Democratic convention, was rapidly circulated throughout the Ohio Valley. This currency was brought about through the copy which was made of the *Gazette* July 31 despatch by widely separated newspapers. In Missouri, the St. Louis *Tri-Weekly Democrat* of August 1 copied the despatch with its "Copperhead" caption. In Illinois, the Springfield *Weekly State Journal* of August 6 made the same copy. In Ohio, the Wooster *Republican* of August 7 made the same copy and captioned it: "The Copperhead Democrats". Further citations might be made of newspapers which through the same method contributed together, within the short

¹ *History of the United States*, IV. 224, note.

² *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (1917), XX. 207.

course of one week, to widely acquaint the public mind of the Middle West with the new nickname.

Multiplied users soon diversified the application of the new term. An Indianapolis letter to the *Chicago Tribune* on August 3 reported grand jury proceedings against "some prominent Copperheads". This account was printed August 5 under the caption: "Preparing to Deal with Hoosier Copperheads". A letter to the *Cincinnati Commercial* on August 21 described a Democratic gathering at Lancaster, Ohio, as one where "the usual number of copperhead lies were told by orators". The letter was published under the indiscriminate caption: "Grand Copperhead Turnout in Fairfield County". These are fair examples of the rapidity with which the new term became generalized. The "Copperhead" cognomen was destined to become an important addition to Civil War nomenclature. After the apparently first appearance of the defamatory word in July, and its spread during August, a month followed during which the term seems to have dropped from the press. But the epithet had taken root in popular fancy and it began to reappear in the press during September and October. The first evidences of a scattered crop from a good seeding are the first findings of Messrs. Rhodes and Matthews, both of whom, from this point on, cite instances of the growing usage of the word. Aside from any antiquarian interest in the determination of the first use of the term "Copperhead" there is further value in its concrete evidence of the early rise of vitriolic politics during the Civil War period.

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